"A LITTLE CHICKEN FARM IN PETALUMA..."

"Conversations on subject of sea-faring men retiring," by Karl Kortum, Director, San Francisco Maritime Museum

"It is said that cooks do not greatly care for food, that jam-makers never touch jam, and that the seaman's dream is ever of a farm."

John Masefield
"In The Mill," 1941

*A little chicken farm in Petaluma*

*Conversation on subject of seafaring men retiring . . Captain Klebingat and Icy Helgason. Recorded by K. K. going up Mason Street, July 27, 1966*

*Helgason:* *"That was a byword by a sailor -- to go to Petaluma and raise chickens."*

*Klebingat:* *"You didn't have to work at all -- just sell the eggs."*

*Helgason:* *"To a seafaring man, thinking about retiring, it seemed an easy way to make a living. But it took a scientist."*

*Klebingat:* *"I saw so many skippers come back from Petaluma and go to sea to get something to eat. ."*

*Helgason:* *"I talked to one -- he told me if he knew as much when he went into the poultry business as when he got out, he would have been alright."*

*Klebingat* *"You remember 'The Terrible Swede' in the Packers? He eventually got his chicken ranch. Up at Petaluma. And the next time I saw him he had no use for chickens: 'Those sons-of-bitches! They climbed on top of each other and smothered to death. 1800 of them! Next night a thousand with their feet up. I had to buy oil to burn the god damn things . !"*

*"Capt. Benneche of the JAMES JOHNSON -- he acknowledged that he had to go back to sea to get money to buy chicken feed.*

* * * *

*"Do you know how 'The Terrible Swede' got his name? He was mate in the Alaska Packers and those Italian fishermen shit in the hay they were carrying north as deckload for the livestock. He caught them and rubbed their nose in it. That's where he got the name, The Terrible Swede. When I knew him he had charge of the GEORGINA in the Creek. Another example of a beautiful West Coast barkentine."*

*"Icy" Helgason, July, 1962. Franciscan Restaurant.*

*"Every sailor those days . . that's all you heard: chicken ranch! Just go around and pick up the eggs. The chicken ranch was a sailor's dream.*

*Who wouldn't sell the farm and go to sea . . .*

*Captain Fred Klebingat, 1978*

*Retiring on a farm -- well, many Pacific Coast sailing skippers did just that. But I heard of only one who made it go! His name was Henningsen and he was skipper of the MARY WINKELMAN for quite a while.*

*A lot of seamen those days thought that life on a chicken ranch was the life of Riley. But most of them found out that they were dealing with the most ornery animal in the barnyard. There was more to it than picking up the eggs in the morning. Most of them went broke.*

*I spoke to Captain Dahlquist, one of the Charles Nelson Co. skippers, when he quit the sea for a chicken farm. "If you see me at sea again," he said, "you can be sure the chickens need some chicken feed." I noted that he went back to sea.*

*Then there was Sutherland -- "Silk Hat Harry," mate in the ARYAN when she last left San Francisco, and in the FALLS OF CLYDE. He quit the CLYDE at Honolulu and went into chicken ranching in the Islands. "One is bound to make money," he said, "with eggs selling at a dollar a dozen." He went broke.*

*And Harry was a man who was careful with his money.*

*Harry later set up as a bootlegger in Oakland; that may have been more successful. Jack Dickerhoff and I were good customers.*

* * * *

*That puts me in mind -- I was mate in the S. N. CASTLE and it was a mean night near Takaroa in the Tuamotus. Captain Von Dahlern said as he left the deck:*

*"Try to make 10 miles west."*

*I tried, but it was raining torrents, and there were squalls and thunder and wind from all quarters. Clewing up the fore topgallant, I muttered:*

*"Who wouldn't sell his farm and go to sea."*

*One of the sailors, a Norwegian, replied, "Sell the farm? Sure, any day. Farm life is worse than this."*

*"You must have tried it," was all I could say.*

*So much for retiring to a farm.*

PORTLAND OREGONIAN

Tuesday

April 2, 1985

# Seafarer Klebingat dies at 95

COOS BAY (AP) — Capt. Frederick K. Klebingat, whose seafaring career went from rounding Cape Horn in a square-rigger to skippering Liberty ships in World War II convoys, died in a hospital Sunday following a heart attack. He was 95.

"He had a career of a wonderful variety embracing Cape Horn square-riggers, deepwater steel ships, and the best products of our Pacific Coast wooden ships," said Karl Kortum, chief curator of the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco.

"It's like he took his last voyage," said novelist Ernest K. Gann, who drew on Klebingat's experiences sailing the South Seas in writing "Twilight of the Gods," which was made into a movie with Rock Hudson.

"He was a poet at heart. He observed things and then he'd write them down. He wrote them down with a novelist's eyes. He saw things I'm sure other sailors didn't see," Gann said.

"All over the world maritime scholars called on his expertise," Kortum added. "You could ask him about an incident from that voyage around the Horn in 1905 and it was like asking a yachtsman how things went last weekend. Every detail was there, every shipmate remembered."

Klebingat wrote 10 booklets on his life at sea, which were published by the National Maritime Museum. Six of the stories were published together as a book titled, "Christmas at Sea."

"His characters have all the vividness of Robert Louis Stevenson," Kortum said. "There's the additional glory that they were real flesh-and-blood people."

He was instrumental in restoring the Falls of Clyde, a floating museum in Honolulu, Hawaii. He served as chief mate of the four-masted iron-hulled bark from 1916 to 1917.

Born in 1889 near Kiel, West Germany, Klebingat went to sea as a deck boy on the full-rigged German ship D.H. Watjen, and rounded Cape Horn in 1905 at the age of 16.

"I realized at an early date that there must be some seafaring going on where one did not have to round Cape Horn in the middle of the southern winter," he wrote. "But to my dying day I will carry those scars on my fingers to remind me."

His first command was the Dutch bark Chin Pu, carrying a cargo of empty gin bottles and carboys of acid on deck from Kobe, Japan, to Manila, Philippines, Kortum said.

In 1919, Klebingat took command of the four-masted schooner Melrose.

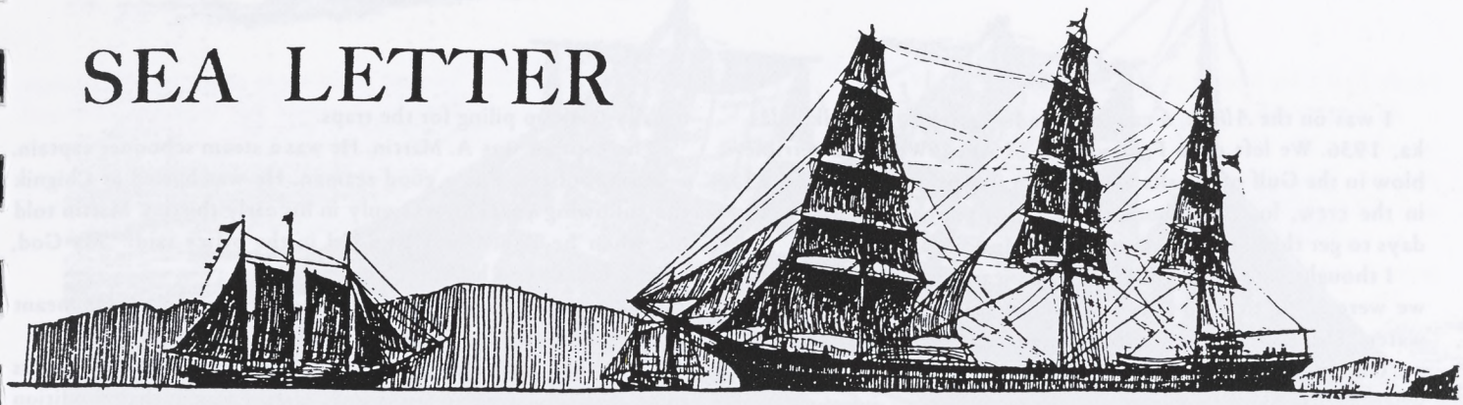
"The Melrose was the last regular Southseaman out of San Francisco, carrying lumber to Fiji and Tonga and returning with copra from Rotuma, Tonga, Niuafoo and Niuatobutabu," Kortum said.

During the Depression he skippered sailing yachts for wealthy Americans, including Zane Grey's Fisherman, Kortum said.

"He commanded Liberty ships and tankers during World War II in both the Atlantic and Pacific and in 1969, at the age of 80, he skippered the motor ship Coos Bay in the coastwide lumber trade," Kortum said.

Klebingat is survived by a daughter-in-law, Mary Klebingat of La Mirda, Calif., and two grandchildren.

# SEA LETTER



OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME MUSEUM / *January 1974*

## A Display of Paintings By Sailorman Edward "Icy" Helgason

The San Francisco Maritime Museum has extended its exhibit of ship portraits by Edward Helgason through this month. The display continues in the central area of the museum's main floor.

Icy Helgason was born on a farm in Iceland in 1895 and went to sea in his early teens, in a cod fisherman out of Reykjavik. Following this, he did an eight-year stint at a Norwegian whaling station on South Georgia, in the extreme southern hemisphere. In 1925 he made his first salmon fishing voyage with the Alaska Packer fleet, first aboard the bark *Star of Peru*, then a year later in the *Star of Alaska*, the Museum's *Balclutha*. He made four voyages in her, and between them skippered his own 90-foot West Coast Tuna fisherman, *Western Traveler*. During the war he sailed on troopships, and aboard liners from 1945 until his retirement from the sea in 1951.

Since moving ashore and taking up residence in San Francisco, Mr. Helgason began painting the ships in which he served and the seas and ports through which they moved. He strives for meticulous accuracy in his ship portraits, all fine examples of an art which expresses the relationship between sailorman and his ships.

Following are some comments by Mr. Helgason relating some of his experiences at sea which in later years he recorded on can-vas with oil paint, the pictures which are in the current exhibit. These were some of Mr. Helgason's remarks in a conversation with Museum Director Karl Kortum last February in the Museum.

# "I always liked a big sea, but. . ."

I was on the *Alitak*, a cannery tender, going to Chignik, Alaska, 1936. We left on a Friday 13th of April. We had a terrible blow in the Gulf of Alaska as shown in this painting. We were 13 in the crew, lost a lifeboat and 13 bags of coal. It took us 13 days to get there and it was my 13th trip to Alaska.

I thought we were a goner. . . I was scared to death; I thought we were going to go. . . they were not seas—they were walls of water. There were about three of them and they nearly finished us. One more sea like that. . . we had only two feet of freeboard when we left San Francisco.

The engine room got flooded so we had to sail just on the stays'l. . . the foundation of the davits tore up the deck when the lifeboat went and the fo'c's'le got flooded.

I was in my bunk when it struck—I was asleep. I was standing on my head for a minute there, and half drowned at the same time by the water that came in. We stuffed the hole full of blankets later.

Martin, the skipper, had tried to heave her to under the stays'l, but it didn't work. So he was trying to run before it, but the waves caught up with him. Those waves that time were the biggest I ever saw in fifty years of going to sea. Actually it wasn't these big seas that did the damage—they couldn't hurt her. It was a smaller wave on top of the big wave. My painting shows the aftermath—we have come out on deck to see what hit us.

I always liked a big sea—the bigger the better. But after those three big waves hit us I hated the sight of a big sea for a couple of years afterward. I would even wake up in my bunk when she leaned over a little far. It was the first time I was ever afraid at sea.

A Pacific American Co. steamer lost two men overboard and the deckload in that same blow in the Gulf of Alaska. They usually took up piling for the traps.

The captain was A. Martin. He was a steam schooner captain, a heavy boozer, but a good seaman. He was buried at Chignik the following year; he was only in his early thirties. Martin told me when he signed on that a girl in the office said: "My God, what a breath you have!"

"You would have, too, if you used what I do—." He meant whiskey and snuff.

As I have said before, it was a tradition in the Alaska Packers ships that you went to sea drunk. Martin was in that condition when we left. Coming around Point Reyes a sea got up and I was at the wheel. Martin was standing there in the wheelhouse, a high water mark from snuff on his upper lip and a good ballasting of whiskey in him. She plunged and he knocked his head against the window—he wasn't too steady on his feet.

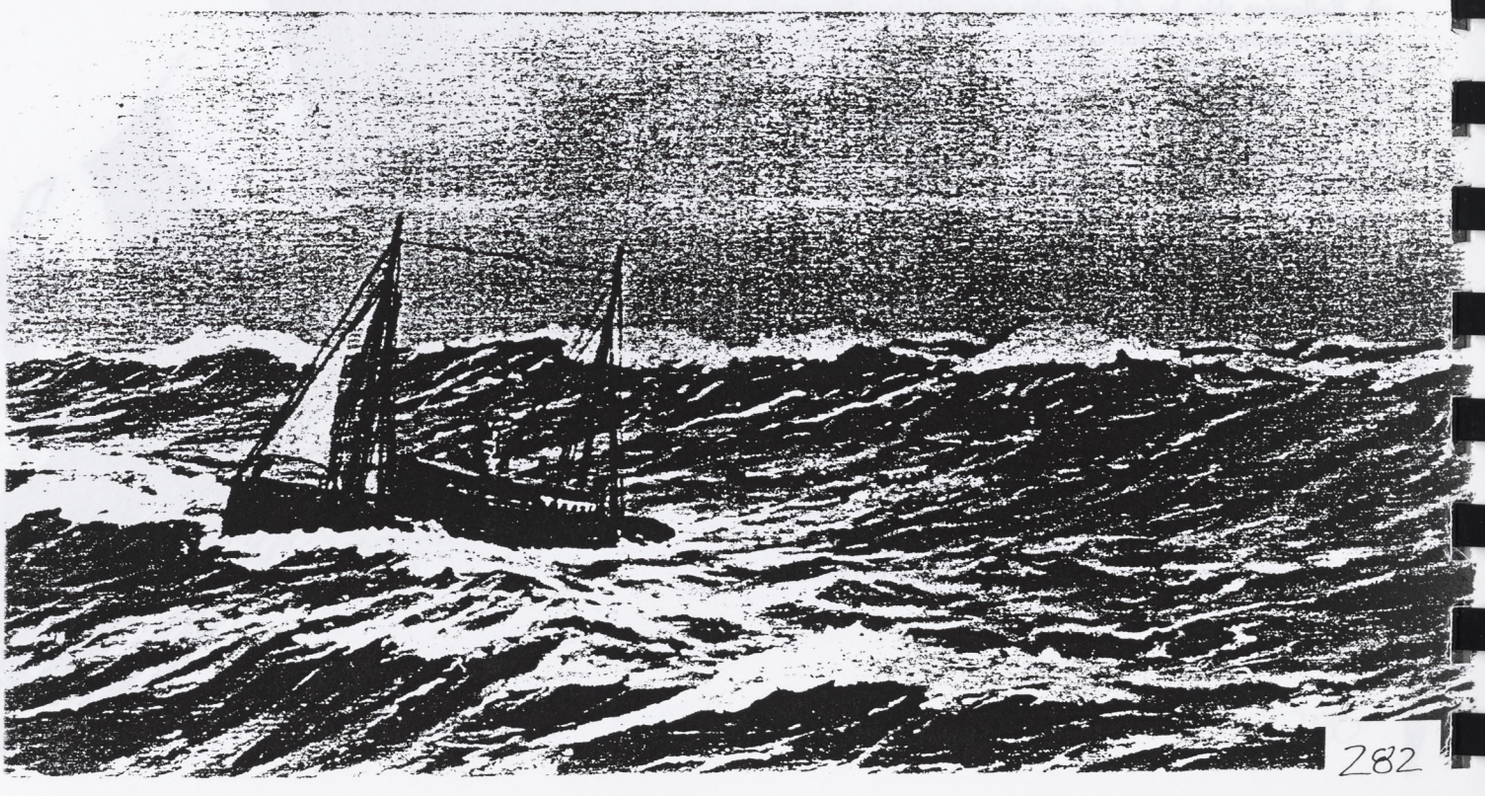
"Icy," he said, "have a drink."

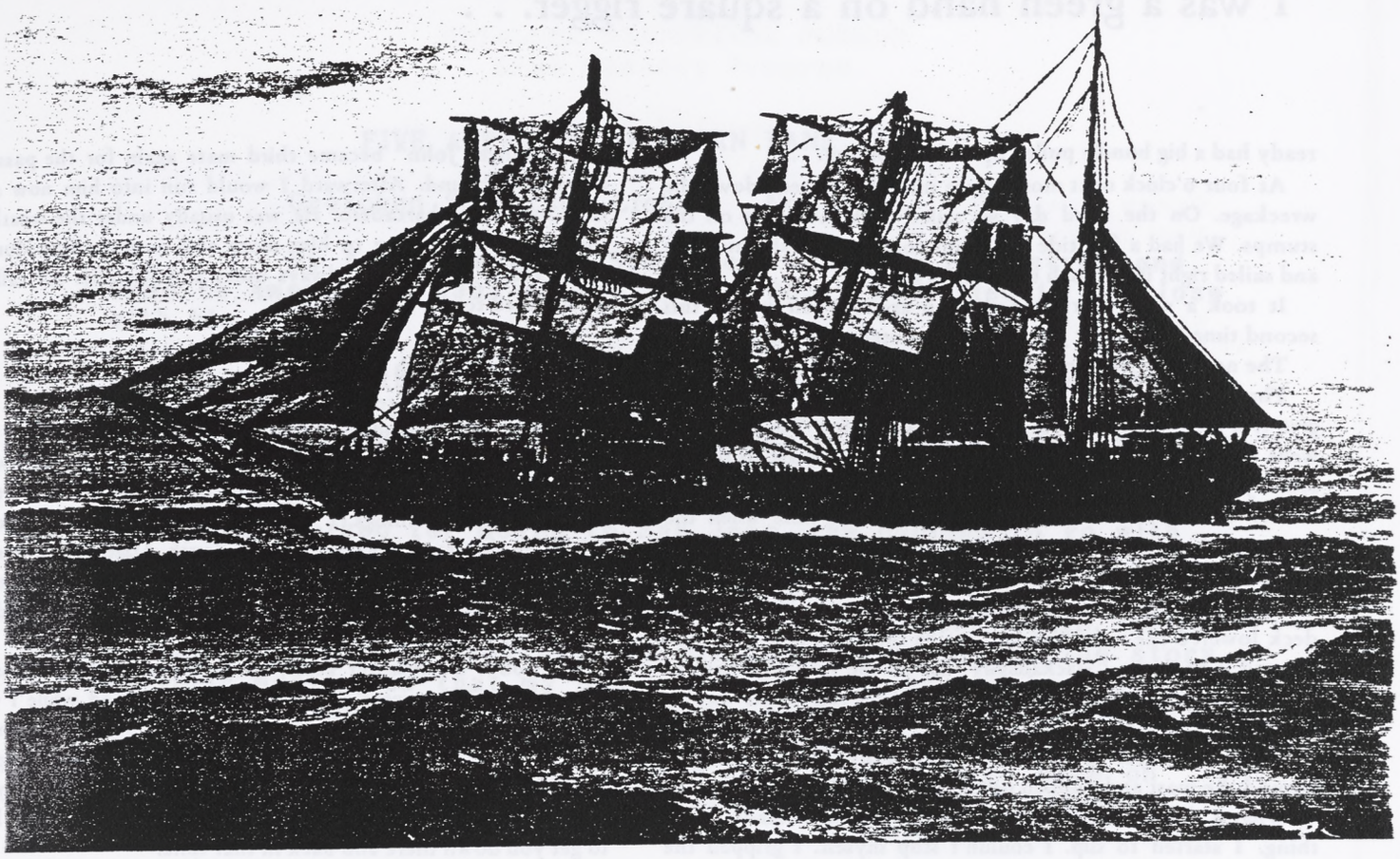
"Martin, I can't take a drink. I'm seasick now."

"What kind of a damn sailor are you, anyhow?" he said. He did not say any more on the subject.

The first night at sea after supper, he brought an alley cat out of his seabag. The cat had no hair on its tail, he was that run down. Martin said that with thirteen men in the crew, he thought it was a good idea to bring another along. The cat was sitting on a bench in the galley when we went over that time. The cat jumped onto a shelf. We had to break the back of the shelf to get him out—he was in the galley but the galley was washed out. Little Johnny had prepared a good Sunday dinner—that went, too.

Later in the season, *Alitak* went to the Alaska Packers cannery at Alitak in Kodiak Island, and here that gray alley cat went ashore in a romantic mood. When it came time to sail the





*The STAR OF PERU dismasted at her topmast caps a few hours out of San Francisco*

cat could not be found. Martin asked the postman to send him to Chignik by mail on the next boat.

Sure enough there was a box for us on the mail boat. It had a cat in it but it was not our cat. This one was striped and looked like a lynx. He acted like one, too—he was that mad at being in the box. Nobody could go near him for days. Some time later he calmed down, but he was not to be trusted. Martin had to pay the freight bill for this monstrosity and he did not like it.

## The *Star of Peru* dismasted

"Stavanger John"—he was a heavy set, big man, very strong. He was unusual, that is. You couldn't forget him once you saw him. But he abused himself, no food—all drink. He was a fisherman when we first left in the *Star of Peru;* he was promoted to third mate when we left port the second time.

Bill Soderquist was mate. A Danish fellow, Carlsen, was originally second. He got hurt when we got dismasted—he got squeezed between the rigging. We left him behind and "Good Looking Jack," the third mate, was promoted to his job.

The Captain was de Sassie. A small man. I remember he had a hard set mouth.

The tug had let us go, all sail was set, a nice breeze. We were about ten miles south of the Farallons. There were sixty fishermen signed on—twenty to a watch; over a hundred people on board in all. I think they were all drunk except me.

I looked up and saw the masts shaking violently every time a swell set her down hard. The rigging appeared to be all loose to me. But I didn't dare say anything—I was going to sea for the first time in a square rigger. I said to myself: "If that mast"—I was watching the mainmast—"is going to stay up, then I'm all cock-eyed." I decided the best place to be was down below. We had just had our supper. By this time there were only a few people on deck—they were all down below tasting their moonshine. They brought it aboard in little wooden kegs. Those were moonshine days—1925.

The trip was not supposed to be a success without heavy drinking at the departure. That was the tradition in the Alaska Packer ships. But I was too green to join in. Actually, for all the drinking, it turned out to be the poorest year ever in the Bristol Bay fishery.

The fishermen, everybody, were all sitting and tasting when it happened. I had just got down below. The whole ship shook. I heard a yell that she had been dismasted. Both gallant masts had come down, carrying the topmast heads with them.

It was beginning to get dark. There wasn't much we could do except take in the lower sails and drift there. We lashed the topgallant masts where they were dangling and smashing back and forth and hammering the lower masts.

We furled the mains'l and had just started down when we heard "Stavanger John" hollering. He was drunk, up on the foreyard. I will never forget it—he was well on his way to getting the fores'l furled single handed.

So we went up the foremast and gave him a hand. John al-

ready had a big bundle pulled up in front of him. . .

At four o'clock next morning we started in to send down the wreckage. On the third day we sailed back into port on the stumps. We had a fair tide and wind coming in in the morning and sailed right in through the Golden Gate.

It took a week to rig the ship up again. When we left this second time "Stavanger John" was promoted third mate.

The new mast was almost my undoing.

The first good day at sea, maybe a week out, I was sent up to give it a coat of linseed oil. An old Italian called "Slackadaguy" went with me. Two men were sent up the foremast to do the same job there. Old "Slackadaguy" was a well-known Alaska Packer hand. He had his nickname from the time when the schooners and steam schooners unloaded with a single swinging cargo boom and the guy had to be slacked with each sling load.

There were no ratlines on the royal rigging, so the watch on deck lowered the royal, we got astride the yard, and then they hoisted it back up. "Slackadaguy" sat on the yard with the can of linseed oil in a bucket and I scrambled the rest of the way up the mast. There was about seven feet of bare pole above the collar of the royal backstays. I wrapped my legs and one arm around the mast and slopped on the linseed oil with a rag.

What I didn't count on was how slippery that made everything. I started to slip. I couldn't stop myself. I gripped the mast like iron but it was no use; I couldn't get a grip with my oily hands. . . I was slipping, slipping. I began to go faster. I slid down what was left of the wooden pole and was now descending the backstay. It was smaller, but I still couldn't stop myself. I had gone right past "Slackadaguy."

At the last minute, I remembered I had a red bandana handkerchief in my hip pocket. I let go with one hand and reached for it and grabbed that big wire with the handkerchief in my hand.

The bandana did it. It was dry and I got a good grip and I stopped. I went back down to deck, considerably shaken. I was a green hand on a square rigger; somebody had assumed I had more experience.

Years later I met "Slackadaguy" on the Front. He told me that he was going to die. I told him not to talk that way, but he said he knew. There was no pension or Social Security in those days; old men like him used to just die at the side of the street. Sure enough, a week later I read in the newspaper that he was dead.

We didn't bring much cargo in the *Star of Peru,* supplies for the cannery, that is, but the bigger ships did. The *Star of Lapland* and the *Star of Shetland* were both of them three times our size and they not only supplied Diamond J cannery at Koggiung but other canneries up and down the river. They must have carried a couple of thousand tons of coal, for instance, between them—I know, because at one point I was shoveling it. The coal was for the boilers in the canneries.

Some of the men from the *Shetland* fished at our cannery, but as I said earlier, it was the worst year they ever had up there. When the season was over the salmon pack from Diamond J cannery—what there was of it—was loaded in the big ships. But all we loaded in the *Star of Peru* was gravel for ballast—we were obliged to sail back to San Francisco with an empty ship.

"Stavanger John" became third mate again for the passage homeward bound. Afterward I would run into him now and then on the Embarcadero. He was usually under the weather; the liquor was getting to him more and more I think during these years. But he was always quiet and friendly. He talked slow. I used to slip him a dollar. . .

## Whaling on South Georgia

When I left Iceland in the fall of 1913, my first place was Tonsberg, Norway. I was so taken by seeing big trees growing in the streets that I had to go over and touch one to be sure that I was not seeing things. I was all eyes that first trip abroad. When we departed Norway for the South Atlantic, we passed the wrecked *Preussen* in the English Channel. I think one of the masts was down, the yards were in disarray. They told us she had a cargo of pianos.

On South Georgia our yearly catch was about 1,000 whales per station. There were six stations on the island while I was there. You went down in a company ship and moved ashore for two years; in the South Shetlands you signed on a ship in Norway and stayed on in her until you got back. Actually in South Georgia the limit of the contract was two years; they had to get you down there and back in that time.

The Norwegians came over and recruited about forty Icelanders. I was about the youngest—I was 17. But I had worked for the owner of a whaling station in Iceland on Mjoefjord for almost three years, starting in 1911. His name was Hans Elefson.

The only way to get a drink in South Georgia was to find a harpoon. You got ten crown and a bottle of whiskey if you could find one. One Sunday afternoon I went walking and I found one after the other. There had been whales beached there, lying at that particular part of the shore, for years. There had been many snow slides the previous winter, and a slide must have come and pushed the carcasses out to sea. The harpoons had dropped through them—rotted through. At least this is the only solution I can figure out. This was about 1919. I had found about three harpoons previously. I was a loner; I liked to take walks. South Georgia was a God-forsaken place, but I thought it was great at the time; I didn't know any better.

It happened to be a very low tide this particular Sunday afternoon and pretty soon I had located about fourteen harpoons. I couldn't believe my eyes. I got a kid to help me; we got a little scow and went and picked them up. I took them to the manager. He was dumbfounded.

"You must have let them accumulate purposely," he said.

"No, these are much older than the harpoons we are using now. These are different harpoons." I was the first flenser. I knew what I was talking about.

The manager didn't really want to give me the bottles. We agreed on one each two weeks, no trouble about the money. He was afraid I would get the rest of them drunk if he gave me the whiskey all at once. That would be the worst thing that could happen. Sometimes those men got drunk on home brew. They came in the middle of the night and wanted to see your liver—Finns, Argentines. The devil of an Icelander comes and takes the best job. . .